

Asena Günal

“Cultural Hegemony” by Means of the Police

This is a somewhat personal text. Osman Kavala is my employer, and also, since he personally works side by side with us in some projects, my colleague. I was not expecting what befell him. I don't know, perhaps because I wanted to believe that everything was normal to some extent, that the authorities still possessed a modicum of reason, common sense and judgment. Because otherwise life would not go on. Exactly for this reason, when a colleague at Anatole Kültür sent me the link of the news published on *Yekvücut* website targeting Osman Kavala, I had replied "they just don't tire of it, do they" and made nothing of it. News that made Kavala a target was nothing new, this was being done for years on various pretexts. However, I should have guessed that this time it was different, that being targeted by a website of the Bosphorus Global project which is close to President Erdoğan in fact meant calling certain prosecutors to duty. As I said, one wants to believe that there is still a modicum of rationality and law left.

After Osman Kavala was taken into custody in the evening of October 18, I still did not expect him to be arrested, which again had to do with my longing for normalcy and law. I guess he himself had a similar feeling: When Anadolu Kültür Administrative Board member Necdet İpekyüz was taken into custody and we asked Kavala "What if they take you too?" he had said, "But on what grounds would they do that?" Yes, he too wanted to believe common sense and law still prevailed in the country, however slightly. He could not have even imagined the senseless and preposterous grounds stated in the indictment. He was caught so unaware that when his name was announced in the airplane, he checked his pockets saying, "I probably dropped by ID card somewhere".

But we should have expected it. Because the detention and arrest of Osman Kavala is a very important part of the political and cultural decimation carried out by the government over the recent years in Turkey. Using the July 15 coup attempt as an excuse, the government has been trying to suppress politics, the press, academia, human rights, civil society and culture and arts, and silence the oppositional voices therein. A classical authoritarian tactic at work: intimidate that which you cannot govern.

The State of Emergency declared following the coup attempt and extended five times since presented this intimidation policy of the government with a golden opportunity. Members of parliament whose immunity were lifted being thrown into jail, as well as opposition journalists; trustees appointed to HDP municipalities impeding the achievements attained in the fields of language, culture, arts, and women's and children's rights; investigations launched

against Academicians for Peace and some expelled through decree-laws; human rights activists suppressed through the Büyükada investigation; the shutting down of hundreds of media organs, foundations and associations; censorship and self-censorship prevailing in culture and arts organizations have all now become ordinary, daily incidents. Everyone, every single person, who acts like there is rule of law in the country and they can demand their rights, is under threat. The regime wants us to accept that this country is now under authoritarian rule and to hole up in a corner. Osman Kavala did not. He continued to advocate for rights within the existing law of the country, he tried to create spaces for dialogue on "dangerous" subjects through culture and arts. And as the grip continues to tighten we saw that the turn has come even for someone who communicates his point mostly through culture and arts activities and strives to keep the channels of dialogue open with all strata of society.

Osman Kavala has long been a target due to his solidarity with the politicians, journalists and academicians whom the government tries to silence; and his support for the nongovernmental organizations working in the field of human rights and social rights; and the projects he carried out through Anadolu Kültür, which he founded with the aim of increasing the production and sharing of culture and art works, emphasizing cultural diversity and cultural rights, supporting local initiatives and strengthening regional and international collaborations; and for spearheading the projects that establish dialogue with Armenia and create spaces for the Kurdish language and culture.¹ He was a target because what he did demonstrated that all these could still be done. He symbolized the belief that there could still be law in this country. And exactly for this reason, his detention and arrest signify the criminalization of all these civilian and democratic activities and the persons and institutions that partake in them. By arresting him, the government wants to browbeat everyone who claims their rights and particularly those who work in the field of civil society and culture and arts.

In addition to all the above, it is also possible to link the reasons for turning Osman Kavala into a target with his intense efforts in the field of culture. The escalated spread of oppression in the arena of culture was portended for some time now; it was betokened by President Erdoğan drawing attention to deficiencies in the field of culture and arts only to place emphasis on building a "local and national" culture and proceeding to set the goal of seizing the reins of cultural power as the next step to political and economic power. We did predict that those who cannot carry out the struggle for cultural hegemony by producing quality works would resort to preventing those who do. But then we would stop and say no, it cannot come to that. We should have foreseen that propaganda TV series do not suffice to try and establish hegemony by "rendering mediocrity the ascendant power" and that the existing actors of culture and arts will be made target. And Osman Kavala has always been one of the most important supporters of culture and arts in this country. He has stood by the good, not the mediocre.

The culture and arts milieu also got its share of the oppressions that began before Gezi and gradually increased, escalating with the end of the peace process, the July 15 coup attempt and the declaration of the State of Emergency. The Ministry of Culture stopped giving support funds first to the producers and directors who came to the fore during Gezi and later to those who signed the Filmmakers for Peace declaration. Moreover, by requiring the film registration document, which used to be mandatory only for commercial distribution, also for the non-commercial screening of Turkish films in festivals, the Ministry turned "a bureaucratic obligation" into a mechanism of censorship. As the peace process was terminated, the works that criticized the state's war policies could no longer be screened or exhibited; the "Post-Peace" exhibition at Aksanat for instance was canceled. On the pretext of "religious sensitivities," the Municipality of Istanbul stopped the screening of an animation video on the YAMA screen on the rooftop of The Marmara Pera Hotel. With the July 15 coup attempt and the State of Emergency, the oppression took on a whole new dimension and people in the opposition were turned into targets and accused of "supporting the coup/FETÖ"; after the Çanakkale Biennial curator Beral Madra was thus targeted the team canceled the Biennial. Several opponent artists working in the municipality run City Theatres, which have been under threat of privatization for some time, were kicked out. There were direct attacks against works of art in several fairs and exhibitions. Surely it was again the Kurds who were subjected to the biggest oppression. As the governance of 83 out of 103 HDP municipalities were transferred to state appointed trustees, the production of culture and arts, which was kept under a close watch even during the peace process, was brought to a halt. Diyarbakır and Batman city theatres, Batman Yılmaz Güney Movie Theatre, Amed Art Gallery and Cegerxwin Culture Center employees were laid off and the institutions were shut down. The appointment of trustees to the municipalities precluded the nearly two decades long efforts towards the institutionalization of the Kurdish language and culture. Institutions operating independently from the municipalities such as the KürdiDer and Mesopotamia Culture Center branches and Seyr-i Mesel Theatre were also shut down.²

Surely all these are not singular events. Culture and arts is perhaps the most important field that exposes the character of the regime.

Before the State of Emergency, a direct government ban on an artistic production was but one of the many forms of censorship that we encountered in the field of the freedom of expression, and it was not even the most frequently employed method. Verbal and written threats against individuals and arts institutions were used more often as tools of silencing. Along with the State of Emergency, legal methods came into more frequent use. Within the environment of oppression in the country, culture and arts institutions and their actors also began to engage in self-censorship in varying degrees. When so many journalists and rights defenders are in jail and a myriad of associations and foundations have been shut down, cultural institutions kept silent in the face of the pressures especially with concerns over disrupting the

relationship between the government and the big capital that sponsors them. In an environment where it has become impossible to say a word on peace and the number of court cases opened on charges of insulting the President has reached four thousand, the individual artists also began to censor themselves more than ever.

In such a period, targeting Osman Kavala and arresting him on groundless allegations indicates that the government and its close circles will continue to deploy the police and prosecutors more and more in their struggle for cultural power. Tanıl Bora explains how the councils of power, who have long since been suffering from a lack of potency in the field of culture, rather than make an issue of a deficiency, inadequacy or reluctance, still employ a victimization discourse to target a subject which in their minds comprises the "white Turks," Kemalists and leftists. Despite the fact that they hold all the means and possibilities in their own hands, if they are unable to produce "work or works" that incite not even their adversary into reading, looking and thinking, then this surely is the way to go: "cultural hegemony" by means of the police.³

This treatment that the circles, which rebelled against the tyrant state for years and made politics through victimization, deem proper today for those who are the most open to dialogue with them is telling. In the language used to antagonize Osman Kavala, as much as the lowliness felt in the face of the value system brought by modernization, there is also the grudge and animosity felt towards a symbol name who has an accumulation in the cultural, artistic and intellectual sphere and strives to do meaningful works with this accumulation. The word authoritarian does not cut it, all these are the stages of the project to return to a sort of age of ignorance. Osman Kavala and his existence was giving hope, courage and energy to all of us who want to struggle against this ignorance that is binding us like a spider's web. That is why there is no concrete evidence in this court case. Because Osman Kavala is not guilty of overthrowing the constitutional order but of giving hope, courage and energy to those of us who want to establish the rule of law in this country. And he will continue to do so whether he is inside or outside...

Translated from Turkish by Irazca Geray and Liz Amado.

¹ For a summary of Osman Kavala's works since the 1980s to date, see: <http://anadolukultur.org/en/announcements/who-is-osman-kavala/406>

² For more detailed information on artistic freedom of expression under the State of Emergency, see the report: "Artistic Freedom of Expression in Turkey: State of Emergency," *ArtsEverywhere*, uploaded August 28, 2017, <http://artseverywhere.ca/2017/08/28/artistic-freedom-turkey>

³ Tanıl Bora, "Kültürel Hegemonya" [Cultural Hegemony], *Birikim*, uploaded February 15, 2017, <http://www.birikimdergisi.com/haftalik/8174/kulturel-hegemonya#.Wf9hYbbBLpB>